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Enhancing the Learning Experience of Interpreting Students outside the Classroom

A Study of the Benefits of Situated Learning at the Scottish Parliament

Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to observe and analyse the potential benefits of the situated learning experience for MSc interpreting students enrolled in the Conference Interpreting and Translation programme at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh by taking them outside the classroom and confronting them with the realities of a working parliament (the Scottish Parliament).*

Our curriculum already includes a number of activities designed to draw on theories of experiential learning developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) generally, and D'Hayer (2006) specifically for interpreter education, for instance in the shape of simulated multilingual conferences organised in a university interpreting laboratory. However, this study is designed to analyse the benefits of taking situated learning one step further, by placing students in the real, live environment in which professional interpreters work: an interpreting booth, during a live Scottish parliamentary session. By taking the learning experience out of the usual academic environment and into a professional setting, we intend to use a mixed-method approach in order to examine how students react to the experience and to what extent it contributes to focusing their study strategies and learning.

Keywords: situated learning, conference interpreting, interpreter training, Scottish Parliament, applied skills.

1. Introduction.

Training conference interpreters represents a challenge for educators: in the vast majority of cases, conference interpreting is taught as part of an academic programme (typically at Masters level), but it is inherently a practical, skills-based course. The programme is taught by academics and/or practitioners, who draw on tailored or original speeches, delivered live or in video format, in interpreting laboratories. This pedagogical strategy, encouraged by professional bodies and large international institutions employing interpreters, such as AIIC (*Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence*) and the DGI (Directorate General for Interpretation), relies on staged situated learning, and has proven its value over time (Wilson, 2012). Research on interpreting has already shown that “learning takes place when the learner is actively involved in situated action”

(Perez and Wilson, 2011: 252). This can be achieved through the use of authentic materials in the classroom (De Manuel Jerez, 2003 and Sandrelli and De Manuel Jerez, 2007). However, in order to take the situated learning experience further, we have focused our study on one particular type of exercise which can be used to train professional interpreters: dummy booth or mute booth practice (both terms are used indiscriminately by institutions such as the Directorate General for Interpretation or AIIC). This practice is described by the DGI as using “a real interpreting booth in a meeting room, which is not being used by the interpreters during that meeting, and in which student interpreters may sit and listen to the meeting, or practise their interpreting in a realistic environment without turning on the microphone”¹. This study, carried out under the supervision of academic members of staff who are also practising professional interpreters, was designed to replicate a real interpreting assignment as closely as possible: students were sent the agenda as and when available, and were encouraged to consider this as an actual professional assignment. The purpose of this study is to consider the value of this pedagogical technique in preparing students to face real-life interpreting. The goal was to demonstrate how the use of such an activity can be integrated in the curriculum in order to contribute to focusing students’ efforts and make them more aware and better prepared for the realities of professional conference interpreting.

The academic rationale behind this study is based on situated learning, which we extended by removing learners from the fully controlled and familiar classroom/interpreting laboratory setting. Situated learning has been at the heart of a number of academic studies since the late 1980s, and this model of instruction, developed originally by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) and further explored by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Kolb (1984 and 2005), to name but a few, has focused specifically on the training context and process which enables student-learners to go beyond academic learning and achieve cognition, that is to say, in this case, to develop a good understanding of the theoretical framework for simultaneous interpreting and to apply these concepts in order to reach professional proficiency. These two essential stages, as argued by Brown, Collins and Duguid, “are fundamentally situated” (1989:32).

But what exactly is meant by “situated”, and how can this model be applied efficiently to the education of future conference interpreters, called to provide simultaneous interpreting in interpreting booths during multilingual conferences?

The key idea, according to Herrington and Oliver, is “to bridge the gap between the theoretical learning in the formal instruction of the classroom and the real-life application of the knowledge in the work environment” (1995:1). This objective is consistent with the aims and goals of the MSc in

¹ (http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/become-an-interpreter/glossary/index_en.htm, 17/02/2015)

Conference Interpreting and Translation offered by Heriot-Watt University, the group on which this experiment is focused. Providing student-learners with adequate training, which will enable them to efficiently bridge the gap between the academic learning environment and the professional world in which their skills will be used, is a challenge. The experiment discussed here aims at demonstrating that this challenge can in part be tackled through an enhanced situated learning pedagogical approach. Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) and Lave (1988) have highlighted the importance of using authentic activities and settings, with the guidance and support of practitioners.

Herrington and Oliver (1995) consider the stages of situated learning further, recommending that students be given multiple roles and perspectives, and that they should be provided with suitable guidance and coaching to enable them to cooperate, reflect on the task and articulate the learning outcomes of situated learning tasks included in their training. This, to an extent, is already included at the core of curriculum design for the conference interpreting courses included in the MSc programme. Class-based activities are designed by academics who have professional interpreting experience, and each interpreting task is set in a particular, defined context inspired by this experience and focused on various key learning stages clearly identified in the interpreting studies corpus. These applied sessions are also used to include a number of specific challenges for students to tackle. As students registered on the MSc course come from various backgrounds, and do not tend to have any prior professional experience of conference interpreting, semester 1 is mostly focused on providing students with the theoretical framework required to then approach skills-based activities with an analytical and reflexive focus (students are required to complete a log-book to develop good self-assessment strategies and reflect on learning practices). Consecutive interpreting and then simultaneous interpreting are introduced during the course of this semester, and the pace, difficulty and numbers of activities are increased during semester 2, taking these concepts further.

However, another factor plays a part in the learning process: the notion of “learning space”, explored by Kolb and Kolb (2005). This aspect was already identified in Dewey’s model of learning (1938:69), when he analysed the intellectual operation at play in a learner’s experience, identifying as the first aspect what he calls “observation of surrounding conditions”, a concept Kolb also refers to as the “here-and-now concrete experience”. These concepts were further considered by D’Hayer (2006), who looked at the application of situated learning strategies to interpreter training.

But conference interpreting training presents a number of challenges when it comes to taking the learning experience outside a purpose-made academic learning space such as interpreting laboratories. Even though students at the heart of this study are used to interpreting in professional-

type conference booths, equipped with interpreting decks similar to those used at the European Parliament, and even though speeches and activities are designed to be as authentic as possible (while factoring in for the gradual development of students' skills), these booths are set in interpreting laboratories on a university campus. The layout and activities may be very practical, and may not resemble a standard classroom layout, yet the learning process is nonetheless taking place in an academic environment. Integrating a form of traineeship or shadowing experience outside the classroom in a curriculum in conference interpreting presents a number of difficulties: firstly, due to the very nature of the activity, the interpreters (be they trainees or professionals) have only got one chance to "get it right" when the microphone is on. Recovery techniques exist, but they require a high degree of experience and practice. Therefore it is hard to imagine a context in which a trainee interpreter would provide live interpreting under the tutelage of a professional, as there is hardly any leeway for the professional to correct the message before it is delivered to genuine users.

So the purpose of our research was to design and investigate the efficacy of an activity that could overcome these challenges and provide students with a learning experience outside the classroom, designed to offer a situated approach and the valuable "transactions between the person and the environment" mentioned by Kolb (1984:34). We also aimed at observing students' motivation and professional focus by confronting them with an authentic interpreting setting and with speeches which may require professional interpreting. As Heriot-Watt University's main campus is located in Edinburgh, it provided us with an ideal solution: the Scottish Parliament is based in this very city, and is equipped with built-in, spacious interpreting booths. Debates take place in English, and tackle a wide range of issues specific to Scotland's devolved powers, and these two aspects actually create an ideal situated learning context.

2. Methodology

In order to consider all the aspects of a situated learning experience, starting with the impact of observation as part of the learning process, students were offered the possibility to watch a live parliamentary session from the viewing gallery a few weeks prior to the actual mute-booth activity. Out of the 21 eligible students, 13 opted to attend, and 8 did not, providing us with a test-group for our study.

The MSc students were invited to volunteer to take part in one of three sessions, during which they spent the duration of a full parliamentary debate (about 2h30 to 3 hours) in a booth, with fellow students, under the supervision of a lecturer who is also an experienced, practising conference interpreter. Students were able to practice mute-booth simultaneous interpreting from the live

debate, keeping their microphone switched off, and since the proceedings take place in English, non-native speakers of that language and students with a B language other than English had an opportunity to work into the language in question. Teams were organised to pair up, for instance, Spanish native speakers with students working with Spanish as a B language, to foster professional cooperation and booth manners, and lecturers were able to supervise the work and provide students with on-the-spot feedback and guidance.

In order to collect meaningful data, a mixed-methods approach was chosen: quantitative, in the shape of questionnaires distributed before and after the dummy practice in the booths, and qualitative, in the shape of in-depth interviews before and after the session. The questionnaires were organised around four key areas: students' preparation, their level of stress or concerns with regard to the task, the challenges faced by participants, and their own professional plans. Students who had observed a live debate beforehand were invited to complete extra questions on this particular aspect of their learning experience. The questionnaires distributed prior to the task invited students to react to statements such as "I think I have prepared properly for this task" or "I think the most difficult task for me will be to deal with the content of the speeches/the technical equipment/the accent/the pace of speeches...", and to indicate whether they strongly agreed, partially agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, partially disagreed or strongly disagreed. This use of rating-scales questions was chosen to encourage students to assess their own skills and performance. To complement this aspect of the questionnaire, open-ended questions were included with the purpose of encouraging students to articulate their reflection on the experiment. Individual interviews were then also based on open-ended questions revolving around similar aspects of the learning process. This research method was selected in order to collect qualitative data based on in-depth reflection on the part of students, who were invited to give more details about their preparation, for instance, or the type of challenges anticipated.

Following the activity in the booths, another questionnaire was distributed on-site, revisiting the four areas identified and asking students to reconsider the statements and rate, for instance, their preparation, their stress level, or the actual challenges encountered. An extra section was included on learning outcomes, inviting students to consider the value of the experiment and its impact on their study focus.

Further in-depth interviews were performed, on a voluntary basis, to better understand students' perception of this task and encourage them to articulate their learning process and consider the next stage in their training in view of the experiment. These interviews were recorded before and after the dummy booth practice activity. We carried out two types of semi-structured interviews,

following Kvale's model on qualitative research methods (Kvale: 1996, 30): first we asked all students a set of questions on their expectations and preparation for the session. This was done on the day of the session or on the previous day. These students were then interviewed shortly after the experiment and were asked similar questions so that they could retrospectively reflect on the task. These interviews, based on open-ended questions inviting students to revisit a number of challenges and specific issues, were devised to fully integrate situated learning strategies in the process: as in the study described by Perez and Wilson (2011:251), students are thus encouraged to learn through "immersion in *authentic* professional situations followed by self-reflection/analysis". Moreover, a group of eleven students had previously been observing a parliamentary session and they were asked an additional set of questions on how this observing session had affected their preparation.

3. Results

3.1 Questionnaires

The quantitative part of this research consisted of two questionnaires, given to participants before and after the practise session. These questionnaires invited them to rate their confidence or assess their abilities in a number of core skills required for professional interpreters. In order to obtain a fuller picture of how best to approach situated learning and basing our approach on Bandura's social learning theory (1977), we also created a test group which approached the activity without any prior knowledge of this environment (they will be referred to as "the test group"), and a second group of participants who were given an opportunity to attend a live parliamentary session a few weeks before the experiment (they will be referred to as "the observers").

The first point considered was preparation: we asked students to assess the suitability of their preparation. It is interesting to note that prior to the activity, students who had not watched a live session felt reasonably confident. Eighty-eight per cent partially agreed with the statement "my preparation is adequate", while only 40% of the observers shared this confidence. A small portion of this group declared they were very confident that their preparation was suitable (10%), whilst none of the test group felt this way, but we also noted that 50% strongly or partly disagreed when asked how suitable their preparation was in the observer group. When we considered the results of the after-session survey, the test group had revised its assessment of preparation: only 12.5% considered their preparation was adequate, and 87.5% deemed their preparation either just sufficient or poor. In contrast, the observers appeared to have assessed their preparation more

accurately; having taken part in the experiment, none considered their preparation to be perfectly adequate, but 46% of them deemed it “just sufficient” (small increase) and only a few more (54%) considered their preparation to be either poor or very poor.

We then asked both groups to reflect on the information given to them prior to the booth practice activity, in order to make them consider the challenges presented when receiving little information, at a late stage. It is interesting to note that opinions were divided amongst both groups prior to the event (with a notable 20% of observers feeling that they had been given enough information, whilst none of the test group shared this opinion). The divide remained notable, to an extent, after the experiment: 87.5% of the test group considered they had been given adequate or just sufficient information to prepare; just over half the observers felt this information was poor or very poor (61.5%), so this group appears to have coped slightly better with the late and limited supply of resources provided.

We also considered the overall level of stress, and noted that it was higher for the test group than for the observers (86% declared they strongly or partially agreed with the statement “I feel nervous before this assignment”, compared to 70% for the observers). But both groups agreed afterwards that it was as stressful as they had anticipated (75% for the first group and 77% for the second). Similarly, the majority of both groups (71% and 70% respectively) expected the accent to be a challenge, but having completed the experiment, they seemed to review their opinion on this aspect: 37.5% of the test group considered it to be either fairly easy or manageable, and 50% deemed it fairly difficult. Fifty-four per cent of the observers considered the accent to be fairly easy or manageable.

When it came to commenting on the potential difficulties presented by the content, again, both groups seemed to share a similar pattern: around 50% in each group considered content to have been manageable. The main difference noted after the experiment was that 12.5% of the test group found the level of difficulty of the content to be fairly easy. It therefore appears that in this case, part of the group had overestimated the challenges content may present. Observing appears to have given students in group two a more accurate estimation of the challenge: 50% of them expected to find content manageable, and we noted the same figure post-experiment.

As far as the pace of speeches was concerned, both groups had similar expectations: when asked to rate the level of difficulty expected, over 90% of each group thought pace was going to be either challenging or very challenging. Afterwards, though, it seems that observers were less daunted by the experiment: 23% of them considered the pace had been manageable and only 31% considered it to be extremely difficult, whilst 62.5% of the test group found it extremely difficult. So it appears

that although the test group and observers both viewed pace as a potentially high challenge, observers coped better than the test group when it came to the experiment itself, while the test group, whose expectations on this point were not informed by observation, did almost all find keeping up as challenging as they had anticipated.

Another important practical aspect in simultaneous interpreting is the handling of the professional technical equipment. Even though all students manipulate professional consoles, roughly 60% of each group felt stressed at the prospect of using a similar type of equipment as part of the experiment. Afterwards, we noted that the perception had changed: 70% of the observers found handling the equipment easy or fairly easy; the reference group showed a lower level of confidence with the handling of the equipment during the experiment, with only 37.5% of them describing this part of the task as easy or fairly easy, and 12.5% even deemed this aspect to be difficult.

After the experience, both groups were asked to reflect on their overall skills, bearing in mind that they were still in the process of completing their training. An overwhelming 81% of them (both groups) deemed their skills to be just sufficient or poor, and only 5% felt they were sufficient. The next question, however, focused on how this experience has affected their professional plan, and showed that more than 63% felt motivated and 16% declared that it had reinforced them in their determination to become professional conference interpreters. The questionnaire also invited students to explain whether this experience had helped them to better understand how to focus their studies and self-study practice, and 85% of the total number involved strongly or partially agreed that this experience would indeed help them target their efforts more efficiently with professional proficiency in mind, rather than just adequate classroom performance; the observers group in particular appears to have gained a lot out of this experiment in terms of learning strategies, with 85% of them agreeing that it has helped them understand how to optimise their interpreting education (the number for the reference group is still high, with 62.5%). Overall, more than 66% of the participants felt strongly motivated by the experiment.

As for the benefits of observing a live session beforehand, 85% of the observers felt that it had helped them cope better with the experiment, proving, therefore, the benefits of observing a real-life situation as such an experience has enabled observers to anticipate and overcome potential problems and issues they would not have even thought of, had they not previously observed a parliamentary session.

3.2 Interviews

Our students have different backgrounds: some of them already hold an undergraduate degree in Translation and Interpreting and others have degrees in different fields of knowledge. That may be the reason why their answers to our questions may have varied. However, certain common trends can be identified.

Prior to the experiment, participants expressed a high level of motivation, seeing this as a fantastic opportunity to improve their interpreting skills and to know where they stood in their interpreting education process. Additionally, they expected to learn how to work in pairs, as at Heriot-Watt University they usually work in individual booths (students seem to prefer focusing on their skills through individual practice, even though they have access to double-booths). In general, students preferred to work in an authentic environment with authentic speeches rather than practising at university (with adapted speeches or authentic ones) in a setting that is familiar and less conducive to stress. It is worth noting that the added stress generated by this experiment was regarded by some students as positive. However, other students were concerned about nervousness and how it would affect their performances; despite the fact it was a mute booth assignment. Students also wanted to be confronted with authentic interpreting difficulties in-situ to confront their problem-solving skills to a live and authentic debate, rather than authentic recorded materials in a classroom environment.

As revealed in the questionnaire results, students did anticipate difficulties with accents, pace and content, with a particular focus on the latter two in the case of students who had observed a live parliamentary session beforehand. Others, especially Chinese students, were concerned with terminology because, as one of them stated, they “come from a very different part of the world so it will be hard to grasp, to understand the background”. On the other hand, students had different opinions as to what would be easiest for them. Some believed that using the technical equipment would not be a problem, others were relieved that their microphones were off; the lack of interpreting users alleviated some of the pressure. Some thought that working with a booth partner would be an easy task. The degree of difficulty as far as accents were concerned obviously depended on the listener and one Scottish national participant felt confident it would not be an issue.

Our interview then focused on students’ preparation. We specifically wanted to know how observing students would modify, if they did at all, their preparation. Most of the students identified two factors which affected their ability to devote more time to preparation: an essay deadline, coinciding with the date of the experience for one of the groups, and the short notice regarding the debate topic, due to the necessary flexibility of the parliamentary agenda.

Having said this, there seems to be a trend among students who had observed a session beforehand: they prepared more thoroughly than those who had not done so. Indeed, one of them had attended additional sessions by herself as an observer to gain more familiarity with the proceedings and context. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning should not be viewed as simply the transmission of abstract and decontextualized knowledge from one individual to another, but a social process whereby knowledge is co-constructed; they suggest that such learning is situated in a specific context and embedded within a particular social and physical environment. Hence, this idea is clearly reinforced by the comments made by our observer students.

Moreover, as far as preparation is concerned, 27% of respondents had already consulted the Scottish Parliament website. Another 33% of students intended to watch videos in order to practice simultaneous interpreting and/or to be familiar with the topic. Some students planned to read different documents (parallel texts, financial articles) from various sources in order to be familiar with the subject matter and all of them intended to prepare a glossary. Also, 20% of students had done or planned to do some research about the potential speakers at the session (the exact agenda and list of speakers is not known until one or two days before the relevant parliamentary session). In addition, 17% of them intended to watch the news and pay special attention to Scottish Parliament-related topics.

Sight translation was also brought up as part of the interview as a very useful technique used by interpreters preparing for an assignment. Agrifoglio (2004: 43) states that 'Sight translation', also known as 'sight interpreting', is an interesting type of interpreting, a combination or hybrid of interpreting (oral output) and written translation (written input). Therefore, we were interested to know if students had used this technique to prepare for their mute booth session. Twenty percent of them said they had done so whereas another 20% had not considered it but declared they'd use this preparation technique in the future. The rest of them were undecided.

As shown by the questionnaires, students were generally not confident that their preparation would be sufficient or adequate. The general concern seemed to be the fact that interpreting students did not know what to expect in terms of the subject matter to be dealt with at the Scottish Parliament.

Interview results have also shown that students had followed a common class preparation pattern, namely that they had first worked by themselves and then, in some cases, shared information and teamed up to continue their preparation.

Our last question before the experiment regarded students' professional plans. Our purpose was to assess the impact such an experience would have on their desire to become interpreters. All

confirmed they would like to embrace this profession although, following the mute booth session, 13% realized that it is a very difficult job and felt that they should wait a few years and/or undertake further training.

Follow-up interviews were organised for analytical purposes and to encourage critical reflection on the part of students. We started our post-interviews by asking students to revisit their learning expectations. Respondents mostly sought a real-life experience in an authentic setting (69%) and 15% wanted to learn about parliamentary protocol. Fifteen per cent noted that they were interested in being confronted with the pressure of practicing in a professional environment, to see how they would handle the stress generated by this environment. Moreover, 20% wanted to learn how to work in pairs.

We then asked participants whether their learning expectations had been met and the answer was almost unanimous: 92% agreed it was the case. It is therefore clear that for students, this type of experiential learning is very positive and constructive.

Students were then asked to review their assessment of the difficulty of the task. This experience was “an eye-opener” according to 21% of participants, and it made them realize that conference interpreting in a real setting is much harder than they had expected, in comparison with student practice as a staged pedagogical activity in an interpreting laboratory.

When asked about what they perceived as the most difficult part of the mute booth experience, two trends could be clearly identified: the pace used by speakers (one of them actually remarked that MSPs were not speaking at a pace aimed to be interpreted) and the different accents used at the Scottish Parliament. The content and terminology were also defined as challenging by 36% of students.

Students were then asked what the easiest part of the whole assignment had been. Forty three per cent answered “handling the technical equipment”. Fourteen per cent said that terminology was easy too. A further 14% said that the working environment was not stressful but one participant believed that nothing was easy.

Our next focus was on preparation. Students were asked about what part of their preparation was useful and relevant and what they thought they were missing. Sixty-four per cent had researched the topic discussed at one of the sessions (the Commonwealth Games) using the official website and other sources and found these useful in order to familiarise themselves with the relevant contextual terminology. Watching videos of previous debates or other Parliament chambers (House of Commons) was also helpful for 14% of students. This particular type of preparation was identified as

a strategy which would have been useful, with hindsight, by the other students, as well as further research about the speakers and about parliamentary protocol. It was also noted that better terminological research would have been useful, as well as sight translation practice.

Students were also asked if they had used video resources from the Scottish Parliament website and we found out that 31% of them had, and 33% admitted that they should have resorted to this website to better prepare for the assignment.

As noted before, the full agenda for a parliamentary session is only finalised and made available at the beginning of the week (sessions attended by students took place on Thursdays), thus limiting specific preparation time. It is worth noting that 29% admitted that more notice would have had little or no impact on their level of preparation. Nevertheless, most of the students (79%), felt that they would have performed better if they had had more prior information.

When asked about the professional environment, students commented on a number of points (the use of monitors displaying the official broadcast, the layout and position of the booths facing the parliament but not the chair). This question led them to realise that not all working environments match the ideal setting usually offered in purpose-made interpreting laboratories.

Students were then asked to reflect upon the experience and come up with advice they would give to their peers for similar future experiments. This strategy was inspired by Dewey's work on human experience, in which he states about the learner that: "What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow" (Dewey, 1938:44). More in-depth preparation seems to be the main piece of advice for future students, such as consulting the Scottish Parliament website, and watching debates online to become more familiar with parliamentary procedures and MSPs' accents. Attending live debates beforehand was mentioned too, as well as using sight translation practice and practising working in pairs.

Observers were asked further questions to determine whether prior observation was useful and why. They all considered it had been a useful experience, as it made them realize the challenges presented by the pace and accents of the speakers, and therefore it helped them to be better prepared for the experiment. A student noted that having been struck by accents, it spurred her onto preparing more for this specific aspect. Another two participants believed that seeing the procedures of a parliamentary session did help them anticipate the different stages of a parliamentary debate and potential problems while interpreting.

We asked this same group whether the observation experience was considered counter-productive: 27% of them believed that this experience may have been negative in the sense that they realized how difficult the task ahead of them would be and felt it would add extra pressure to the dummy booth experience. But 63% did not find it counter-productive at all. A student even stated that such pressure could be positive and spur them on to do further preparation.

Observers were asked if attending a debate beforehand led them to devote more time to preparation; 64% said it had been the case. As mentioned above, another student decided to attend more sessions as an observer on her own and that allowed her to become familiar with different institutions, organizations and committees, thus improving her preparation for the experiment.

Students were then asked if they could apply anything learnt during their observation session to their interpreting session and, if so, what it may be, so that they would reflect on the experience and articulate the learning process they went through, in accordance with the research concepts developed by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), Bransford, et al. (1990) and Collins, Brown and Newman (1989). Ninety-one per cent of respondents considered that this was the case. The answers range from note-taking (27%) to knowing about the procedures of the debate (36%) and they also include the tone used by MSPs and how members from political parties interact.

When asked about how this experience had affected their determination to become professional interpreters, 73% confirmed it was still their plan, and one stressed that the experience had even boosted his motivation. However, others who were less sure about their professional plan declared that, having observed the skill level required and the pressure brought about by a professional context, they would not want to pursue this career path.

Finally, they were invited to make extra comments and 22% of the students stated that they found this experience very difficult but that it gave them a better idea of the level required of professional interpreters. Thirty-three per cent of respondents stressed the difference between classwork and a real interpreting experience such as this. A further 33% of the students referred to the experience as “good” or “great”.

4. Discussion.

The quantitative data has highlighted a number of trends, further confirmed and supported by the qualitative data results.

Observing a live session has given students a more realistic perception of what constitutes suitable preparation for interpreting in a professional setting. Interestingly, students who had had a chance to observe a session beforehand felt their preparation was less suitable than the other group: this ties up with a heightened awareness of what might be suitable preparation in the observer group, who, having a clearer idea of the challenges ahead, would have liked to have more materials and more time to do further research. The questions on stress factors before and after the session also seem to reveal that this kind of situated learning experience can contribute to building students' confidence on specific aspects such as technical equipment handling or booth manners. These are fundamental skills for students to master wishing to enter the conference interpreting profession with confidence, and some technical aspects may be disregarded in conference interpreting training, especially in systems with a limited amount of contact hours. A graduate may be an outstanding interpreter but feel ill-at-ease handling interpreting consoles: not knowing how to set a relay would render the best training pointless. Additionally, one of the participants noted that having a monitor in the booth to follow the debate was useful, as booths only have a partial view of the chamber. This kind of facility is rarely found in classroom settings, which tend to be designed intentionally to represent ideal conditions; encountering a practical issue linked with physical booth layout gives students a chance to think about the actual working conditions they may encounter in their professional lives and allows them to anticipate possible solutions to potential practical problems such as poor visibility of the working environment. Having a reference group and a group of observers has also led to interesting findings, from which it may be inferred that although both groups anticipated a struggle with the pace used by members of the Scottish Parliament, the observers' group coped with the actual challenge better. Similarly, observers seemed more concerned initially with the challenges presented by the use of the equipment, but few of them actually found it difficult, while the reference group had less concerns about this aspect but more of them noted afterwards that it had been more challenging than expected.

It appears that advanced awareness has given observers a chance to prepare better and feel less anxious.

It also seems that although the experience appears to be rather humbling for students, with a large majority of them feeling they still have progress to make after encountering a professional setting, it is nonetheless very encouraging and inspiring, as a large majority emerged from this experience motivated and keen to embrace this career-path. This experience, performed whilst students were approximately half-way through their MSc, has also been deemed useful for study purposes, with students stating they now have a better understanding of their training and feel more confident about focusing their efforts on the right aspects. Taking students out of their usual learning

environment at this stage has given them a better understanding of the level of professional proficiency they should aim for, thus giving them an added perspective to better analyse their classroom performance.

This experience has been enlightening for students because they can apply learnt lessons to their interpreting training and made them aware of the gap between interpreter training and the real world. Two students went further, suggesting including this kind of experiences in our MSc curriculum. Practice in an authentic setting could indeed enrich curricula across universities dealing with conference interpreter training but we understand that it is not an easy component to include in all teaching programmes due to practical constraints, such as access to real-life events or national or international institutions' facilities for practice purposes. A number of aspects of this experiment could however be replicated: students may attend open lectures and public events to familiarise themselves with the type of professional surroundings in which interpreters work, and could practise simultaneously with an infoport if no booths are available for dummy-booth practice.

On another note, a participant admitted she should have taken more notes as an observer had she known how difficult the mute booth experience would be. Finally, another believed it would be good if they could have had more practice sessions like this as she believed this experience had been enormously useful. Organising practice sessions in an authentic environment can be complex, but it would be worth including more of these sessions at various stages of the learning process, so that students may be reminded of the professional proficiency they are aiming for.

With this experience we also wanted to assess how students would apply preparation techniques introduced in class to a semi-real interpreting situation. We tried to identify whether the "observer" cohort would prepare differently from the "non-observers" and how this observation of an authentic session would help them anticipate potential interpreting problems. In fact, many "observer" students found the dummy booth session easier simply because they had acquired much needed context-specific knowledge about the running of a parliamentary session, such as turn-taking and protocol proceedings.

5. Conclusions.

By taking students outside the classroom to make them encounter a real-life situation in which they may interpret a live debate (but using dummy-booths) and by conducting pre- and post-interviews, we aimed to apply the model developed by Wild and Quinn (1998:75), namely: "to provide for problem-based learning in situated practice activities, and further facilitate the abstraction of

commonalities across a range of different examples of problems and contexts". This study served a number of purposes: it made students more accurately aware of the real challenges posed by a mute booth experience and of the preparation needed for professional assignments; it was motivating and inspiring, and the use of a reference group and of an observer group has also established that observing live sessions of events in which students may interpret professionally in the future helps them understand challenges better, prepare more efficiently and assess their skills and the effort required to progress better. One of the main goals of our research was to devise an experiment which would enhance interpreter student training. By taking learners out of the familiar university interpreting laboratory environment, we aimed at making them realise the gap that exists between classroom performance in a safe, controlled space, and the realities of practising conference interpreting in professional conditions, from authentic conference proceedings delivered live and in-situ. By doing so, we aimed at encouraging students to become more aware of the community of practice specific to conference interpreters, thus adopting a pedagogical concept developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). Indeed, students did end up reflecting and working on a number of key skills identified and mapped by professional interpreters on the NNI interpreting skills map (National Network for Interpreting's skills map²). In class, authentic speeches may be modified and tailor-made speeches can be created to suit training for the acquisition of a particular skill, such as, for instance, the inclusion of a large number of figures in a consecutive interpretation speech to enhance the students' note-taking technique. However, in order to fully train students, it is essential to give them a more holistic understanding of what conference interpreting entails: in our experiment, students are confronted with authentic speeches in an authentic environment and technical equipment has to be used in real time, combining all the challenges at once. Interviews showed that this comprehensive experience of professional interpreting practice is what students sought. The experiment also highlighted interesting points regarding preparation, which can better inform pedagogical strategies in the classroom: it is clear that observing a live event, especially with the prospect of doing some dummy booth practice at a similar event in the future, has helped students better understand the type of preparation required for authentic interpreting assignments. This observation stage could be an interesting learning experience worth building into the fairly early stages of the learning process. The views of the non-observers, and their confidence in their preparation skills, later proven to be less adequate than they initially thought, also suggests that preparation skills need to be made the focus of more guided practice in the classroom. These skill-based activities could be introduced following an observation session, using an authentic agenda of a conference or parliamentary session to come, to anchor the task into an authentic setting and

²http://www.nationalnetworkforinterpreting.ac.uk/tasks/int_skills/player.html (20/02/2015)

encourage students to draw on their observations to better target their preparations. It may even be constructive to encourage students to then observe the session for which they prepared either in-situ again or via the live streaming of parliamentary debates, so that they may observe again, and assess their preparation. But further experiments would need to be carried out to study the efficiency of combining observation and preparation skills in a classroom environment.

The benefits of situated learning are beyond doubt, as has been demonstrated with the results obtained from this experiment carried out with MSc interpreting students enrolled in the Conference Interpreting and Translation programme at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. Such a model of interpreter training enables students to gain a much clearer understanding of the profession they are considering, and it could potentially be replicated under various formats, for instance by institutions located near premises equipped with professional booths used for multilingual events, with the organisers' cooperation. It is also worth developing authentic interpreting practice activities in cooperation with external participants or other departments to give students a better understanding of the professional proficiency they are aiming for, but these alternative forms of further situated learning strategies for interpreter training would need to be the object of further investigations. Taking students out of the interpreting laboratories and making them face the real-life experience of having to interpret at an actual working parliament (the Scottish Parliament) has proven to be a highly beneficial activity for them. However, as has been stated earlier in this article, students were at the start of their second semester of conference interpreter training; the experiment proved to be very constructive in terms of motivation and comprehension of classroom-based training for students, but it would be interesting to see what the learning outcomes such an activity would yield if performed once students have completed their training period. This model of situated learning in-situ could be included in a number of other academic curricula, and this type of practice could be applied to other key forms of interpreter training, such as chuchotage (whispered interpreting) or consecutive interpreting, in cooperation with other departments or by involving non-academic partners.

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